I WILL FEAR NO EVIL
Psalm 23
Mark 1:21-28
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One of the more bizarre current in modern thought is a sudden interest in and fascination with the occult. For some people, particularly the young, it is becoming an obsession. Witchcraft, which everyone thought had passed into an ignoble history with the eighteenth century Salem trials, is enjoying a tremendous renaissance. Interest is high and wide-spread in the subject of demons and demonology. Astrology has never been more lucrative: shops dealing in the paraphanelia of the occult, witchcraft and the stars have blossomed all over the country. And there has arisen, on the fringes, a religious twist expressed in Satan Worship.

The phenomenon is important enough to have made the cover of Time Magazine a year or so ago. And one of the conclusions of the very informative cover article was that our particular age, in which things seem "out of control"; in which there seems to be an insidious and sinister force at large in the world, fosters this kind of thinking.

Whatever the logical explanation for the phenomenon, it is here. And it seems to have come to a head in the recent release of "The Exorcist", probably the most talked about and controversial motion picture of the year. Hollywood knows a good thing; and more to the point knows how to promote, or exploit - if you will, a good thing. The longest lines in memory are queing up to see it - which may prove that the only thing more exciting to the American cinema viewer than pornography is the possibility of being scared out of his wits.

In any case, The Exorcist, a book by William Peter Blatty, was a best seller two years ago. It is about a young girl who is progressively "possessed" by the Devil, and the "exorcism" - or driving out-of the devil by a Jesuit priest. I read the book. It was highly entertaining; good writing - good reading: diversionary, frightening in the way that is fun to be frightened on occasion. But the transition from book to film has added another dimension, as often happens when Hollywood puts its craft to work on the written word, another dimension that intensifies

and amplifies the experience described on the page. Hollywood, you will recall, made the Spirit of God into a green gas in the Ten Commandments. In the case of the demonic - possession by the Devil - accompanied by skilled lighting, music and dramatic inuendo - the result is apparently a profoundly disturbing experience.

Time, last week reviewed the film, and I found some of the comments worth sharing:

"Jesuit priest John O'Neill thinks that some of the film's explicitness might be excused as a device to show the power of evil" - and confessed that he was not able to sleep for several nights after seeing the film.

"Dominican Father Richard Woods,... encountered 23 cases of people who thought they were possessed by the Devil after reading The Exorcist: he now fears another wave of hysteria from movie goers"... "The movie is going to cause so many pastoral problems I wish they had never made it.." Jesuit Richard Robins warns, "Students say they wish they had never seen the film.... I saw ten-year-olds in the theater...That is nothing short of a crime." (Time, January 21, 1974, P.45-47)

With all of that asa backdrop - the current phenomenom of the occult - the book - the movie - and the probability that we will find ourselves talking about it with someone in the near future - let's take a look at the question in the context of faith; for that is where it belongs. Beginning with an incident that occurs in theearly pages of Mark's Gospel, and then proceeding backward to the very basic Biblical position as reflected in the 23rd Psalm.

With four new disciples Jesus traveled to Capernum, a settlement on the western shore of the Sea of Galilea, to take up residence in the home of Simon Peter. The scene of the incident is the Synagog: in Judaism of the day a "lay" institution which was used for three purposes - a school for the young, a court for trying minor offenses, and a place for worship. The day was the Sabbath: Jesus and his friends were in attendance. The custom prescribed a portion of the Law and the Prophets to be read and then a Scribe - or a visiting Rabbi would interpret the scriptures. The method was to cite other

authorities - much as a preacher will quote a theologian or Biblical scholar to document his point.

So it was that Jesus began his teaching - by commenting on the scriptures in the Synagog. And as soon as he began he created a sensation. He cited no authorities other than himself. "You have heard that it was said of old, but I say to you" was his technique. The people were astonished at the obvious implications of his method, and more astonished at the truth and goodness of what he went on to say.

That's the point of Mark 1:21-28. Here is a teacher with authority, not borrowed from others, but lodged directly in himself. And what happens next is in the text to illustrate that point, if anyone failed to get it the first time around. Jesus' discourse was loudly interupted by the intrusion of a man with an "unclean spirit"; that is to say, possessed by a demon. He shrieked: "What do you want of us Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?" That is to say, "Do you presume that authority also?" And Jesus said simply, "Be quiet - come out of him." Mark reports that the man was suddenly convulsed, then quiet and healed. The people who were astonished at his teaching authority were now dumbfounded. Something new was happening in their midst. Some new kind of power they had never experienced before. The incident is repeated in the New Testament many times but the point is always the same. Jesus Christ is , himself, the ultimate power of God.

Yet the question remains, "What - really - is going on here?" And the answer lies, as usual, back on the edges of recorded history. Men have always attributed misfortune, natural calamities, sickness - in fact, anything that could not be explained - to the work of evil spirits. It never occured to anyone to doubt their existence. The Jews were inclined to believe that they were the spirits of fallen angels, or the spirits of the dead. They were thought to reside in tombs - and the desert. The Near East idiom "The howling of the desert" still indicates the popular belief that there are demons out there. A popular cliche in Jesus' day was that the air was so

filled with demons that a needle held upright would touch at least one.

Now, to live in that kind of context, was to live with a permanent fear. It was also, unfortunately, to deduce that persons who exhibited frightening and irrational behavior were possessed by a demon. Into that category went the mentally ill, the epileptic, and interestingly, the very gifted. Jesus, himself, was said to have a demon.

Jesus' method of dealing with the situation contains no clue as to whether or not he believed in their reality. It does, however, demonstrate that he took very seriously the effect the belief had on the lives of people. And apparently his approach worked. People were made whole again. And more to the point, his power and authority were recognized as the only power and authority that really mattered.

The popularizing of the demonic in novels and movies such as The Exorcist is accompanied today by a renewed interest on the part of the scholars. Rollo May (Love and Will) describes the demonic as a state in which a natural function takes over the whole person, and writes that violence is simply a small but natural aspect of the whole man that suddenly goes awry. A man becomes possessed. I continue to see the best illustration of that in Mackey Arena - when the combined spirit of 14,000 people slowly begins to take over until it fills the building and people do all sorts of things that would land them in a straight-jacket if they would suddenly erupt in that kind of behavior at the office. If you have ever watched the films of Nazi rallies in Nuremburgh and Munich you have seen the power of a spirit big enough to absorb millions of individuals until it has an identity of its own. And if you know anything of what transpired as a result you know the raw and incredible power of the demonic.

A little more modestly, George Plimpton writes about his career as an ersazt quarterback for the Baltimore Colts, training for one series of plays in a pre-season game against the Lions. One day he was asked if he wished to participate in a particularly brutal exercise; and he reflects that "from

somewhere deep inside me someone said "yes". It obviously wasn't me talking." Translate that - the portion of Plimption's manhood that seeks adventure and can never turn down a "dare" took over. And for a moment he was possessed. Or of course, Flip Wilson, who excuses outrageous behavior with "The devil made me do it".

In one of this, though , is there an answer to the question that really bothers us : are there really demons? Are there evil spirits? Does Satan exist? Some reputable people say yes. For what is is worth, I say no.

I believe that the church wrongly used the ignorance of the first century, first to frighten people and second to get them inside the Church. All the while missing the Biblical witness that there is no power that stands beside the power of God. I believe that Satan has been used as a moral cop-out, not only individually, but to relieve men of the responsibility of dealing with evil in the world. And I believe that the current interest in the topic is basically harmless until it drives us backward - away from what we know to be true -away from the deepest assertions of our faith - to a kind of irrational and unhealthy fear.

Evil remains. Helmut Theilicke, in a sermon on the phrase "Deliver us from evil" once said, "Dear friends, in our time we have had far too much contact with demonic powers..."(Our Heavenly Father, P.133). The kind of "out-of-control evil" that makes us wish we could blame it on the devil remains in the world. And it is here that Christianity has been too soft and too naive. To put it in the context of Theilicke's comment, if the Church of Jesus Christ had been a little more concerned about the demonic spirit of Naziism, and a little less concerned about doing battle with a cloven hoofed devil, the history of the mid twentieth century might have been different.

The basic question, when all is said and done is pastoral - and personal- and intimate. It has to do with us - individually - our fears and our hopes.. And I bring it to rest back, centuries before Christ, in a basic and fundamental position of our faith.

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil." That is no cliche, even though we may have made it into one. It is the root of faith, the basic trust that even the most eloquent don't express very well, that regardless of what happens God is still in control and there is no need ever for irrational fear.

Isolate the phrase: think about it, "I will fear no evil." It is significant for what it does not say. There is no sugary suggestion here that evil is not real. There is no simple minded *naivete'* that suggests that evil is an illusion. There is no suggestion that the valley of the shadow of death really isn't all that bad once you get used to it. The Bible is here and everywhere consistantly honest about the reality of evil. War - starvation injustice-accidents-even the dark vally of death are confronted by the Bible with integrity.

Nor is there a suggestion here that we will never be afraid. There are threats that provoke normal fear. Fear is healthy and creative when it motivates us to find a cure for Cancer or to build a dam against the flood. One writer suggests that being afraid is almost a moral responsibility in view of the negative possibilities in the world and that our real danger lies in the "devil may care" attitude that refuses to acknowledge the threats all about us.

The text doesn't say: 'don't be afraid". What it does say is": I will fear no evil." Of all the threatening possibilities that confront us, none is ultimate: none needs to put us in absolute terror. That is, there is no reality such as described and dramatized by The Exorcist and exploited by the occult.

The Biblical affirmation is realistic - we will walk through the valley of the shadow of death. But there - even there - we need fear no evil - for our shepherd is in the valley with us. The Bible is realistic - but buoyantly joyful. For even in the presence of my enemies - my fears- God sets a table, and we sit down and eat together. Even death - my death-my final

enemy - my ultimate fear - even there I can expect my God to set that Table. "I will fear no evil."

Faith that rests on that is peace and freedom. Faith transforms death from an ultimate enemy into an incident. I have seen that. At the hospital bedside of gravely ill people I have been taught about a God of love who comes with grace and comfort and strength. I have learned in ways I cannot very well explain about the presence of the shepherd in the valley and about the living reality of the affirmation, "I will fear no evil."

I believe that God is present - even to those who cannot call him by name. I read recently a book that confessed that eloquently though reluctantly. Stewart Alsop, journalist and columnist for Newsweek has written about his experience with Leukemia, thought to be terminal, but now - at least temporarily - dormant. In the preface to his book "Stay of Execution" he writes

> "Death is, after all, the only universal experience except birth, and although a sensible person hopes to put it off as long as possible, it is, even in anticipation, an interesting experience."

That is the author's style, supported by friends like Alice Longworth, who, when she heard about his illness wrote this note: "Stew, What a nuisance. Love, Alice."

In one brief section Alsop deals with religion. He walked into an Episcopal Church and sat down to pray. He tried the Lord's Prayer and forgot the words halfway through. He reflects: "I have been an agnostic since I was about eighteen. I am an agnostic still.....And yet.... And yet (I remembered) Hamlet: 'There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy'.....I do not say there is no God, I say only I do not know whether there is a God.There is certainly a mystery out there somewhere...I have developed an incantation from an anthology of Winston Churchill. He describes how he was run down by a taxi in New York and suddenly this - 'For the rest, live dangerously; take life as it comes; dread naught; all will be well'...I find myself repeating that sentiment like

a talisman - or, I suppose, like a prayer." (P.142-143)

That is the deepest prayer in the human heart. It is a prayer heard by God: a God who is in the darkest valley with us. It is the dearest hope of all men: a hope thatfaith confirms and that the Gospel of Jesus Christ celebrates.

"I will fear no evil for thou art with me...
thou preparest a table before me
in the presence of my enemies....." AMEN

Father, take up our fears, and by your love help us to live in freedom, through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN